

Book Review

Ion Bria, **Romania: Orthodox Identity at a Crossroads of Europe**. Gospel and Cultures Pamphlet 3. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995. Pp. 54. \$5.50, paper.

This is a very important, but all too brief, work by Professor Ion Bria, a Romanian Orthodox theologian who spent more than twenty years in various offices at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, where he also served as the primary consultant on his church until his retirement in 1994.

The monograph ostensibly has a two-fold purpose: To examine the relationship between Orthodoxy and culture in Romania and to plead for ecumenical understanding and cooperation. He also hopes that his work will assist others outside the country to comprehend the religious situation so that they can intervene in creative ways. He indicates that he is writing from an Orthodox perspective, but at the same time he offers a courageous and penetrating critique of his own church and its leaders.

Bria states that he will not engage in "unnecessary polemics or apologetics," but it is highly questionable as to whether or not he succeeds in this effort. He touches on many sensitive issues and there are instances in which his objectivity can certainly be challenged. Most of his work is devoted to an exposition of the historical and theological development of one of the most common themes of contemporary Romanian Orthodoxy--the unity of Orthodoxy with the soul of the Romanian people. It is not fully clear whether or not his focus on this subject is meant to be an explanation or a justification of this theme. He looks upon this unity with a great deal of nostalgia, and although he is aware of the danger of nationalism, he finds it difficult to articulate a creative role that the minority religious communities can have in this area.

The deeply held conviction of the unity of Orthodoxy and the Romanian people is mythologized by some Orthodox theologians as if it were divinely mandated, and it frequently finds itself much too comfortable with destructive forms of nationalism. How Bria hopes that it could possibly promote the ecumenical cause is difficult to determine. It may well be that the "ethnic formation of the Romanian people took place simultaneously with the penetration of the gospel (the Orthodox faith)," but what does that mean for the contemporary situation with its large ethnic minorities and for the many ethnic Romanians who have voluntarily identified themselves with the religious minorities? This deeply-rooted Orthodox belief may well prove to be the major obstacle to authentic dialogue between the majority and the minority churches. Bria may not be aware that Nae Ionescu, who is one of his sources for the development of the mystical unity of Orthodoxy and the soul of the Romania, is also considered to be one of the "mentors" of the infamous Iron Guard.

Bria is very alarmed by the chaotic, "incoherent" state of the Romanian society and the Orthodox Church, by the "perfidious agnostic indifference" of many Romanians, and by the moral and spiritual plight of its young people. He deplores the entrenched traditionalism in the church on the one hand and the rising mysticism on the other, points to the danger of "nationalistic captivity," and calls for a transformed church which will be fully involved in the burning issues of the day. He is deeply concerned regarding the lack of leadership to guide the church into a new age. He raises the very revealing question: "Who are the ecclesiastical leaders who have the right to speak about Orthodoxy as good news for Romania?" Without an internal reformation and renewal he warns that there will be empty churches and parallel religious groups. He also raises the specter of "civil eruption" and the "self-destruction" of his church. He obviously believes that the Orthodox Church finds itself in the midst of a profound identity crisis.

His plea for ecumenical understanding and cooperation at times sounds more like a call for confrontation than an invitation to dialogue and he needs to develop his views further on what the relationships of the majority church and the minority religious communities should be. He appears to be

very comfortable speaking about ecumenism in general, but when he specifically refers to the non-orthodox Christian communities his ecumenical vision has serious limitations. To be sure he indicts all of the churches with "ecumenical hypocrisy," which they would undoubtedly repudiate, and there is no question but that the theology of ecumenism needs to be further developed in all of them. He unfortunately charges the Reformed and the Lutheran churches, the erstwhile ecumenical partners with the Orthodox, with being prompted by "confessionalism and ethnocentrism" because of their opposition to the legal recognition of the Orthodox Church as the **national church**. This is a very complex matter, and since the strong disapproval of these churches very likely provided the motivation for Bria's study, it is very important to see the causal factors in the right perspective.

Following the revolution in 1989--before the new Romanian constitution was developed and the additional legislation on religious freedom was proposed--there were strong differences of opinion between the new Ministry of Religious Affairs and a number of the religious communities regarding the parameters of the newly found freedom. To avoid more serious conflict the Ministry established a committee in the spring of 1990 with representatives chosen by the fifteen fully recognized religious communities to draft the new religious legislation which would then be submitted by the Ministry to the country's new parliament for approval. The proposed legislation, which was developed by the committee, on the whole undergirded and amplified the constitutional declarations. It reaffirmed that the Romanian state recognized, respected, and guaranteed the liberty and autonomy of the religious communities. It stated emphatically that the ecumenical spirit, tolerance, and mutual respect must be at the basis of the relations among the religious communities. Professor Gheorghe Vladutescu, the head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, was proud of the committee's early unanimous decision that there was to be no state church. All the churches were to be equal before the law and the state; there was to be no privileged church with any form of discrimination against the other religious communities. There had been vigorous discussions regarding this issue in the constitutional debates, but in the end the implication clearly was that all the religious communities, including the majority church, were to be treated equally.

The final draft of the proposed religious legislation brought about a serious division among the representatives of the churches, and this has not as yet been legally resolved. At the final meeting of the committee (October 28, 1993) two of the most articulate bishops of the Romanian Orthodox Church were sent by the Holy Synod to insist that the phrase **National Church** be added after the listing of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Article 22 in the proposed legislation. This came as a shock to the representatives of the minority churches since this issue had not been raised by the Orthodox representatives on a committee which had been deliberating for more than three years, and the timing was such that there could not be a serious dialogue on the full implications of such a proposal. What had been the most significant ecumenical and democratic encounter of the religious communities regarding the rights to which they were all entitled and the freedom which they should share ended in a very serious confrontation between the minority churches and the majority church.

The official Orthodox explanation was that this unquestionably was simply a statement of a historical and cultural fact and that no legal advantage was intended or desired for the Romanian Orthodox Church. The Protestant churches (Reformation and Evangelical alike) were joined by both the Roman and the Greek Catholic churches in radical opposition to this addition and stated this officially in a footnote in the proposed legislation which they finally agreed, with considerable reluctance, to present to the parliament. They were convinced that this addition represented a serious contradiction to Article 4 which was an unambiguous declaration of their full equality before the law and the state. They also felt that it violated the spirit of the Romanian constitution and their proposed legislation regarding ecumenism and mutual respect. They feared that it would reinforce the myth that there was a mystical or inextricable unity between the Orthodox Church and the soul of the Romanian people and that only Orthodox believers could be trusted as loyal Romanian citizens. This has long been a very contentious issue. They see the Orthodox Church as unequivocally identifying itself as the church of the Romanian

people and all too frequently as the sole vehicle whereby the national and spiritual identity is preserved, thus raising serious questions about its understanding of the importance of the religious and ethnic pluralism within the country and of the true nature of religious freedom.

The minorities perceive this as a serious threat to their freedom. There is a deep underlying fear that this last minute intervention was an attempt by a very insecure hierarchy to sabotage the entire document and to assert the supremacy of Orthodoxy with the power of the state behind it. The proposed legislation has been in the hands of the parliament for three years and there are reports that even more substantive changes are contemplated. An interrelated complex of unresolved tensions has surfaced which has damaged the relationships of the religious communities in the past and continues to trouble them in the post-communist era leading to distrust and antagonisms which have deep historical roots.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has not wavered in its determination to be established legally as the national church. In January, 1994, it changed its own constitution to incorporate this concept and it has continually defended its right in this regard even to the point of supporting an amendment to the Romanian constitution. It is clear that the rationale for the proposed amendment has changed or has been further disclosed with the recent surge of nationalism in Romania. It is unfortunate that there has not been an authentic dialogue between the minority churches and the majority church over how the national church issue can be resolved. The Lutheran and Reformed churches sharply criticized, through their representatives, the lack of ecumenism in Romania at a meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC in January of 1994. This declaration helped to undermine the hope of the Romanian Orthodox Church that the WCC Assembly of 1998 (its fiftieth anniversary) would be held in Bucharest.

Bria, furthermore, has no word of understanding or reconciliation for the Greek Catholic Churches (or Uniates) and accuses them of proselytism; he revives the charge of their "dubious origins" almost three centuries ago and shows no sympathy for the violation of their human rights. What is indisputable is that the Greek Catholic Church suffered more than any other church under the communist tyranny and its leaders were models of courage and faith. Many of their leaders died in prison and approximately 2,000 Greek Catholic churches were taken over by the Orthodox. There is no question but that a serious dialogue is necessary with the Orthodox to bring about forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation between these two communities and to facilitate the return of hundreds of former Greek Catholic churches which are under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church but not used. The Greek Catholics highly esteem the Orthodox Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu for the compassion that he has revealed to them and for the churches that he has returned.

Bria is also very disturbed about the criticism expressed by one of the Baptist leaders in Romania over the possibility of an Orthodox believer becoming the president of the country, and he is concerned about the influx of western evangelists and missionaries which he maintained had brought "a destructive form of populist proselytism." There is no credible study which supports his conclusion on this matter. It is most unfortunate that he misses the opportunity to reach out to the evangelical movement in Romania which is the largest in Europe with the exception of Russia and has many members who would welcome better relationships with the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the World Council of Churches is making serious attempts to establish working relationships with evangelicals throughout the world, and direct contacts were made with the Romanian Pentecostals in 1995. It is important to note that this movement includes churches (Adventist, Baptist, Brethren, and Pentecostal) which have long been marginalized and oppressed not only under the communists but also in the interwar period when the Orthodox Church was the national church. Now these churches fear that this could occur in the post-communist era as well. There are still Orthodox leaders who use inflammatory language and refer to these churches as sects and cults and call their members heretics who are subversive of the true faith and the nation. Some of Bria's comments could too easily be interpreted in this manner. At no point does he affirm that the evangelicals, too, are members of the people of God. The time has come when there needs to be a careful assessment of Orthodox - Evangelical relationships in Romanian history as well as at the present time in order to bring about forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation between these two communities.

Some of the evangelical groups have existed in Romania for more than a century but, due to the political and ecclesiastical pressures under which they found themselves, assumed a very low profile. In the years immediately following the overthrow of the Ceausescu regime some of the western evangelicals about whom Bria complains were able to assist the Romanian evangelicals for the first time, but it is important to note that most of the western evangelicals are very responsible in their activities and have also been involved in extensive humanitarian projects which have provided invaluable support to the marginalized members of the Romanian society. The flamboyant western evangelists who appeared in Romania in 1990-92 have left for other arenas, but the Romanian evangelicals are motivated by a profound missionary imperative and have every right to share their understanding of the "good news" with their neighbors who are part of that large number of "agnostic" Romanians about whom Bria writes; indeed Bria is inspired, possibly by their zeal, to call upon Orthodox believers to a renewed understanding of mission, "to participate in making the gospel a concrete reality in human history, to see the transforming power of grace in society, to experience the therapy of the Word of God." There is far more that the Christian communities in Romania have in common than what separates them, and the Romanian society presents them with a complex of challenges which they can scarcely begin to meet even if they were fully united much less alone.

There is a summer seminar held annually at the Black Sea University entitled **Encounter of Religions in the Black Sea Area** which brings many young people together from the Romanian Orthodox Church as well as from the ethnic and religious minorities. These young people have been amazed to discover how much they have in common. Their evaluations have indicated that at the seminar they had a unique opportunity to have their consciousness raised and informed regarding the issues that divide them, they had their understanding of democracy deepened, they encountered one another at the personal level and became friends, they learned from each other, they challenged one another to be sure but also in unforeseen ways they were enriched by other faith perspectives and liberated from false views of their neighbors, and unexpectedly they came to appreciate and respect one another. Indeed, they sensed a oneness that they never knew existed. They have worked together on a common ecumenical project in which they ministered to some of the neediest members of the Romanian society. The religious leaders need to learn from the experience of these young people to overcome their prejudices and misunderstandings and to enter into meaningful forms of dialogue with one another.

Bria recognizes that, difficult as it might be, the Orthodox Church must learn to live with ethnic and religious pluralism. He also observes that being the church of the majority places a unique responsibility on the Romanian Orthodox Church, and he stresses that "it must be open to others, willing to understand others and to receive gifts from them, to pray and learn from one another." He still would like to assume, however, that Orthodoxy is the "essential core of the Romanian cultural patrimony" and that the Orthodox Church is the "defining institution for the historical continuity and spiritual unity of the country." It is obvious that there will need to be a very careful dialogue with the minority churches regarding this aspect of his ecumenical vision. He concludes his work on this note: that there is "good precedent" for the hope "that the stone rejected by the builders will some day prove to be the cornerstone of the building."

What the minority churches are waiting for, however, are not merely ecumenical professions or proclamations and subtle forms of Orthodox triumphalism but authentic ecumenism in actual practice and in substantive ways. It was the hope of the minorities that there would be a new understanding of the churches and their freedom in a democratic Romania which would enable all of them (majority and minorities alike) to make their maximum contributions to the "soul" of a pluralistic Romania so that they could fully cooperate as equals before the law and the state to bring about the creation of a just, civil, and transfigured society. Unquestionably the minorities, too, should be given the opportunity to tell their story and share their vision--just as Professor Bria was--in the **Gospel and Cultures** series published by the World Council of Churches.

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